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SENSITIVE
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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: GAZA, GUANTANAMO, AND A LEFTIST THAW: MEETING WITH
ACTIVISTS

REF: A. TUNIS 0061

[1](#)B. 2007 MOROCCO HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

[1](#)C. INR ASSESSMENT: GAZA CONFLICT TAKES TOLL ON U.S.
IMAGE 02/18/2009

Sensitive but Unclassified. Please Protect Accordingly.

Summary:

[1](#)1. (SBU) A leftist human rights activist broke a long-standing boycott to meet with us on February 17, after he was barred from entering Tunis for a human rights conference in late January. The fact of the meeting was a sign of a nascent but broad thaw beginning to take place due to the change in U.S. administrations. Although he and a colleague strongly criticized the USG's role in recent Gaza events, he left the door open to further communication. Reflecting what we hear in other contexts, it appears that leftist Moroccans' perceptions of the U.S. and its policies are beginning to drift towards the positive, but are still subject to hardening as a result of external factors such as incidents in Israel/Palestine. End summary.

Background

[1](#)2. (SBU) On February 17, PolFsn and PolOff met with the head of the Maghreb Coordination Office for Human Rights Organizations (CMODH) Abdelhamid Amin, who, on January 23, was barred from entering Tunisia to attend a human rights conference (Ref A). Amin is also a board member and past president of the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH), which, with 20,000 members, is Morocco's largest human rights group (akin to Amnesty International). AMDH is influential and has not been afraid to challenge the monarchy and existing order, leading to the long-term imprisonment of some members (Ref B). The organization has vocally criticized and boycotted all contact with the USG for five years out of anger over U.S. Middle East policies. Amin agreed to see EmbOffs only in his CMODH hat. However, the meeting was held at AMDH headquarters, in a room emblazoned with posters and containing a papier mache face with padlocked lips, where the CMODH is temporarily based.

Welcome to Tunisia...Now Go Away

[1](#)3. (SBU) Amin told EmbOffs that a diplomat (whose name he did not know) from the Tunisian Embassy called him a week before he was scheduled to depart for a Tunisian Human Rights

League (LTDH) convention and suggested that he attend.⁸ A day later, the same officer called back and informed Amin that he would not be granted entry if he went. On debarking from his airplane on January 23, Amin said he was met by a group of plainclothes officers who asked him to re-board the aircraft. He refused, and they ushered him and a traveling companion into a room at the airport. He called LTDH members and informed them of his situation. After a period of fruitless discussions, he agreed to return to Morocco. He wrote a letter to Moroccan Prime Minister El Fassi, and AMDH held some protests outside the Tunisian Embassy, but El Fassi's office said there was nothing more it could (or would) do.

¶4. (SBU) Amin explained that the CMODH is composed of fourteen human rights groups from the five Maghreb countries and two organizations in Paris. It was founded in Rabat in 2006 to coordinate support for victims of human rights abuses and to increase communication and skills among human rights activists working in the Maghreb region. In a surprising statement, given his and the AMDH's history, he said he was quite open to the idea of CMODH partnering with the USG on projects or funding, &as long as it did not compromise our independence.⁸

Viva Guevara!

¶5. (SBU) A cell phone playing Hasta Siempre (the &Che Guevara song⁸) interrupted Amin's explanation. The phone's owner, who had been sitting at the other end of the conference table reading newspapers, turned it off, flung a

corner of her keffiyeh angrily over her shoulder, introduced herself as Samira Kinani, and said AMDH should not be meeting with the U.S. Embassy. PolFsn assured her that the meeting was with Amin in his capacity as CMODH President, but Kinani reiterated the need for the boycott, highlighting Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine as key areas of disagreement. "We are revolutionaries, and we must stand up for principles," she emphasized.

(And Why Are You Here Anyway?)

¶6. (SBU) Kinani interrupted the meeting again to ask PolOff why he was meeting with NGOs and why she kept reading news reports of American officers roaming the country "questioning people." "Would you accept such interference if Moroccan officials acted similarly in the U.S.," she asked. Kinani added that U.S. diplomats should limit their discussions to governmental channels. Kinani appeared surprised and mollified when she was told that the USG thought it crucial for its representatives to hear more than just official government perspectives, and placed great importance in hearing criticisms of U.S. policies from average Moroccans like herself.

Gaza Supersedes All

¶7. (SBU) Amin respectfully but insistently questioned why the USG persisted in violating international law through "its actions Palestine." He dismissed recent Executive Orders related to Guantanamo and torture as "small responses to recent events" that pale in comparison to the "decades-long crime" of U.S. Israeli policy. Kinani once again intervened asking why the USG refuses to apply the UN charter in relation to Israel, supports war criminals because they are Israeli, refuses the right of Palestinians to a state, and considers Palestinians terrorists.

¶8. (SBU) Amin interjected that he, and most Moroccans, do not support HAMAS's religion-based vision of governance, but he respects the fact that they won the popular vote in Gaza.

He added that USG actions vis a vis Israel have helped recruit terrorists and made it difficult for moderate regimes like Morocco's to counter extremists. Kinani dismissed any comparison between Israel/Palestine and Arab states' policies toward Sudan.

The Beginnings of the Thaw

¶9. (SBU) Towards the end of the meeting, Amin said he was hopeful about the new Obama Administration, but that he was taking a "wait and see" approach until it had a chance to prove itself. No friend of the Moroccan power structure, Amin, nonetheless, said that Morocco was the most advanced country in the region in terms of reform and human rights. However, he encouraged the USG to hold the Moroccan Government and other allies accountable for violations and backsliding regardless of counterterrorism imperatives and strategies. He asked the Embassy to continue contact with him and the CMODH and said he appreciated the opportunity to speak, and appreciated the USG's willingness to listen. A more pleasant and relaxed Kinani asked for EmbOffs, contact information and shared the address of her blog.

Comment:

¶10. (SBU) The very fact that this meeting took place, after several weeks of telephone and email negotiations, is a sign of how the change in U.S. administrations is beginning to alter dynamics on the ground in Morocco. It also provided a window into evolving leftist Moroccan perceptions and attitudes towards the USG. Despite the sometimes strident and doctrinaire statements made during the discussion, Amin seemed to treat the event as a test case for restoring "relations" with the USG.

¶11. (SBU) Comment continued: Kinani's surprise and eventual warming as a result of personal contact with EmbOffs reinforces the importance of enhanced and broad Embassy outreach in all MENA countries during this transition period

to "rehumanize" the USG to skeptical but grudgingly hopeful populations. Both Amin's and Kinani's comments made clear, however, that the current thaw is fragile and subject to disruption by events in Israel/Palestine and beyond (Ref C).
End Comment.

Visit Embassy Rabat's Classified Website;
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>

Jackson